

In The Sundown Salons ed. Fritz Haeg, MIT Press, Boston, 2009

Who am I? I'm a poet. My business? Writing.
How do I live? I live. In my happy poverty
I squander like a prince, my poems and songs
of love. In hopes and dreams and castles-in-
air, I'm a millionaire in spirit.

– Puccini, *La Bohème*

BY MATIAS VIEGENER ··· There is a lot of symbolism at work in the Sundown Salons, beginning with the setting itself, which is like a body. Most of the traffic moves through the mouth of the kitchen, on the middle floor, and then trudges up to the geodesic dome perched on top like a giant brain, with a deck outside and eyes to the panoramic view of city, hills and freeway. Eventually people settle downstairs in the gut of the cave, sprawl on the floor or on foam pillows. They talk, look, listen or perform. Contingents often wander outside, up and down the hill in the garden, which is always neat and messy at the same time. The lucky few can be found groping each other, either in the cave or having sex among the vegetables, which puts eroticism right in the lap of fertility. Sex is good in the vegetables, whose iconic shapes are as symbolic as the geodesic dome. The cucumber, the carrot, the eggplant. Vegetables are the right metaphor because they always give back more than they get. You add water and good soil and they give you everything. The basis of the Sundown is in this kind of exchange:

a gift with hardly an expectation of return. In an art world governed by commodification, this alone is reason to celebrate it.

The idea of breaking from the pure exchange value of a commodity has been part of Bohemian culture for nearly two centuries. In their many variants, these subcultures almost all reject commerce and search out iconoclastic and heady mixtures of sex, delirium, politics and art. Unlike most communities, which are based on ethnicity and class or tradition and location, they are primarily cultural communities, people gathered around the production of cultural surplus, art, fashion, hedonism and excess. Unlike traditional communities they are self-chosen and often utopian, based on a critique of the societies in which they arise. They are deeply marked by their contexts, mostly reacting against prevailing politics and culture, and often attracting the attention of the very society they want to reject. Perhaps it means that the relation is not exactly oppositional: one traditional function of the avant-garde (with which the Bohemians overlapped) has always been to predict or anticipate the needs of the society that surrounds it.

Bohemian communities mostly thrive in repressive times and eke out a cheap and often nomadic life in the unregulated spaces of ghettos, industrial zones, immigrant neighborhoods, red-light districts and like the Sundown Salon, in

people's homes. The salon has an aristocratic history from the late Renaissance to the 19th century, when a whole upstart of artists and Bohemians outside proper society (and often with political contempt for the ruling class) begin to gain power—not so much economic or political power, but cultural power. The first salons were serious gatherings of cultured “people of quality” to discuss the art and literature of the day, often run by women in their homes (salon being the living room, though others were held in bedrooms or boudoirs). They were exclusive rather than inclusive, formed either by a narcissistic desire to be seen as a person of culture or with cultural capital, or from sincere interest in poetry or art. But in their origin, they rise from the will of the ruling class to retain their social power through fluency and familiarity with contemporary art and literature.

Art has never been separate from power, but its currency usually arises from a capacity to resist power and conventionality while still creating material that the culture values. The salons of the seventeenth and eighteenth century often functioned oddly like the medieval guilds that began to fade from their great power over the arts, especially craft-based artistic production. At their worst, salons were snake pits. They thrived on flattery and gossip, which along with food, were often their most resonant social bonding force. Careers and aesthetic tastes were forged through intrigue. The salons were distrusted by the Church because they focused on aesthetics over piety; appealing to the self, the gossip, frivolity and feasting paved the way to sin and hereticism.

Sundown Salon is much less like the salons of history than it is like another nearly evaporated social formation, Bohemia. Less a place (though named after a part of Czechoslovakia) than a state of mind or way of life, Bohemianism first appeared in about 1830 as the Industrial Revolution rolled into high gear. Cities swelled with all kinds of people displaced both from the countryside but also from other countries; political ideas fermented with aesthetic ideas, so that Realism and then Naturalism came to be revolutionary aesthetics. They reflected the same liberal values that lead to the pan-European revolutions of 1848, many of whose principles had percolated through the Bohemian world. For men of genius and distinction like Gautier, Baudelaire and Verlaine, Bohemian Paris was a golden but transient experience. It was a time and place where artists of all types spent their lives outside society, choosing the freedom of penury and squalor over prosperity and convention. The new wealth of the industrial Revolution drove the creation of all kinds of more marginal economies, including Bohemia.

The Bohemians left their families behind and moved to Montmartre or Greenwich Village—they clustered in cities where there was cheap decontrolled space and a crossing of classes and often cultures. Unlike the artist's guilds that were the counterpart of the salons since the Renaissance, Bohemian communities were eclectic and fluid. The conversations of the Bohemian salons were not between art critics or aristocrats and artists, but between artists of all genres, eccentrics, misfits, and the demi-monde of sex workers, drug addicts and alcoholics. Radical figures like Rimbaud could come from the middle classes, which were coming slowly to predominate

over art production; what characterizes the members of this class in Bohemia was their tendency to loathe their own class background, generating the impetus for work that challenged and shocked the middle class. There are very visible Bohemian movements, Paris of the 1800s, London of the late 1800s, as well as several twentieth-century periods including post-World War II, and the Beat and Psychedelic movements, but there are far more less visible ones.

The first salons were for the elite, and over time the bourgeoisie were offered entry. Bohemia as an idea and a social formation evolved more organically, taking root also in the middle class but offering a wilder mixture of classes and exotic influences. Sundown Salon is a reworking of this formation,

nomadic, fleeting and magical. In this sense, Sundown Salon resembles what philosopher Hakim Bey calls a Temporary Autonomous Zone, a momentary space and time in which alternate forms of thought, action and culture can arise. Fritz Haeg's geodesic dome is both spaceship and cave, hosting a set of utopian experiments that for a short passage of time changed the lives of those who participated in them. Buckminster Fuller conceived of the geodesic dome in an idealistic reformulation of a way to live, its geometric purity, hexagon, septagon, octagon, arguing for a new form of the idea that anatomy can be destiny. The constellation of aesthetics and politics that appeared in the Sundown Salons reflects a post-millennial shift taking place in the art world. The

work that has appeared in the spaceship of the dome was often connected to new technology, video, sensors, feedback loops, projections. Disembodied in this sense, but also full of zesty physicality, movement and dance. There was an emphasis on craft, such as knitting, bookmaking or food, demonstrating a desire to connect art and everyday life. And issues of the environment, natural materials and the earth reflect a growing wave of ecological thinking which has anticipated the swell of environmentalism now just beginning to arise.

And why do we fall in love with Bohemians? They are young, reckless, fast and bright. Because they move fast, they are thin and luminous. Because they are reckless they don't care about mistakes, so they make

things fast and make them without regard for existing ideas on how to makes things. They will never return our love, so we love them all the more. Because they are nomadic, they will never stay and always move on. They are both moth and candle, more beautiful moths moving to bigger candles until they finally burn up. They never sit still. They will eat with their hands, draw with their feet and have sex with their friends because they are not supposed to. They're not interested in being nice; they want to be interesting. We love them because they touch our deepest fantasies of both rebellion and belonging, of making art that is unpredictable but also makes links between its making and how we live, or might live, if everything were possible.



The parking sign that greeted salon visitors to the dead-end Sundown Drive. [FH]